

NFAC 5345-79
5 October 1979

Memorandum for DD/NFA

Subject: A Look at US Intelligence Assessments re SE Asia,
1965-75

1. Recently, on my own initiative, I completed a review of the US finished intelligence documents concerning the Vietnam War, period 1965-75, held in CIA record storage [redacted]

[redacted] Professional curiosity was the primary motivation stemming from a close personal involvement in the war and some rather deeply held convictions concerning the weaknesses of US strategy, such as it was, the way we conducted the war and negotiated our way out of it.

2. Results of that examination are described in the attachment. Therein you will note that I focused on only the major strategic aspects of the war. It has been a professionally rewarding experience, primarily because (i) many of my own judgments were confirmed, and (ii) the record clearly brings out the extraordinarily good performance of the CIA. The basis of this judgment was purely professional. The question of the rightness or wrongness of the American commitment in Vietnam was not considered.

3. As a result of this brief excursion into the past, it occurs to me that the Agency should commission a special historical effort that would describe and objectively evaluate the Agency's performance (analytical side, not operational) during the Vietnam War. This would be well worthwhile from a national as well as Agency point of view. It should be written by outside professional civilian historians with stature and completed before memories get too dim and files become lost. I understand that the Agency's historical program has been considerably curtailed, but I believe that this particular undertaking would not only enhance the reputation of the Agency but also boost the pride and esprit of CIA personnel. The desired result should be a fairly short publication, well documented, and if at all possible, unclassified.

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4. Recommend you consider the above proposal. You may wish to send this to the DCI and/or the Deputy DCI, and I have no objections.



Bruce Palmer, Jr.

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Attachment:
As stated

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4 October 1979

Memorandum for the Record

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1965-75

1. In the summer of 1979, I examined numerous US-produced finished intelligence papers pertaining to the war in Vietnam and Southeast Asia made available to me by CIA officials. In toto, these classified documents are believed to constitute the bulk of available major finished intelligence on the Vietnam War for the 1965-75 period. These documents, numbering over 200, are broken out below by year. They are predominantly CIA products.

1965-69	58	(incl. one SNIE)
1970	51	(incl. one SNIE and one CIA post-mortem)
1971	42	
1972	36	
1973	20	(incl. three NIEs)
1974	11	(incl. one NIE and four IIMs)
1975	87	(incl. one NIE and three IIMs)

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2. In examining these files, I was primarily interested in those overall assessments which addressed Hanoi's strategy with respect to the United States and Vietnam, to include North Vietnamese perceptions of the US war effort; the effectiveness of the US air war against North Vietnam; North Vietnamese capacity to wage a prolonged war and their dependence on the Soviet Union and China; and prospects for South Vietnam after the January 1973 cease-fire. A very brief summary of twenty-two documents selected from the above files is enclosed (1965-1; 1966-4; 1967-3; 1968-3; 1970-3; 1971-1; 1972-4; 1973-1; 1974-2)^{three} 1975-1

3. From this brief review of these files, I have come to the following conclusions:

a. The Central Intelligence Agency did an exceptionally fine job in assessing the situation in SE Asia throughout the war.

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b. With respect to the major aspects of the war, the Agency's overall judgments were sound and their estimates were generally on the mark.

c. The Intelligence Community's estimates with respect to South Vietnam's prospects after the January 1973 cease-fire were essentially correct.

d. The one exception to the foregoing concerned the role of Cambodia in the supply of Viet Cong/ North Vietnamese Army (VC/NVA) forces in South Vietnam. During the 1967-70 period, CIA seriously underestimated the volume of supplies entering Sihanoukville by sea and moving overland through Cambodia to VC/NVA forces in II, III, and IV Corps of the Republic of Vietnam. However, this relatively minor exception does not detract from CIA's extraordinary record with regard to the most important aspects of the war.


Bruce Palmer, Jr.

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Enclosure

Enclosure

Notes from Intelligence Documents on Vietnam War
2 March 1965 - 23 December 1974

Preamble

Almost all of the documents cited below are CIA. Two NIEs, one SNIE and one IIM are listed, as well as one CIA/DIA Intelligence Report and a CIA Intelligence Post-Mortem.

This list does not comprise all of the intelligence papers produced during the period but only a few (22 selected from over 200 documents available). Those selected focus on North Vietnam's strategy and will to prevail; the Soviet and Chinese role in the war; the effectiveness of the US air war against North Vietnam; North Vietnam's manpower and logistic capabilities to sustain its war effort; the enemy strength buildup in South Vietnam; and net assessments - North vs. South Vietnam; at various points in time.

Date
of Paper

Paper

8 Nov 65

CIA Intel. Report - "Evaluation of Allied (US and GVN) Air Attacks Against North Vietnam"

- (Note: A sustained, but restrained air offensive, called "Rolling Thunder", was launched on 2 March 1965 against selected military and economic targets in carefully delimited areas of North Vietnam.) There is no evidence to date (November 1965) that air attacks have been successful in diminishing the willingness of Hanoi to support Communist forces in Laos and South Vietnam.

1 Jun 66

CIA-DIA Intel. Report - "Appraisal of Effects of the First Year of Bombing in North Vietnam" (Note: 80 percent of North Vietnam's limited, modern economy areas - containing 75 percent of the population and the most lucrative military and line of communications (LOC) targets - was not bombed.)

Notes from Intelligence Documents on Vietnam War (continued)

- Hanoi has been forced to cope with disruption, but has been very successful in overcoming interdiction efforts. The cost to Hanoi - diversion of labor; introduction of Chinese logistic troops into North Vietnam; and the economic and military damage has simply been passed on to the USSR and China. (USSR provided 70 to 95 percent of military aid in 1965 - SAMs, AA guns, aircraft, trucks, radar, jet fuel; China provided infantry weapons and ammunition, a few aircraft, and some trucks.)

Mar 66

CIA Intel. Memorandum - "The Role of Air Strikes in Attaining US Objectives in North Vietnam"

- Under the ground rules of employment and force levels of 1965, bombing of North Vietnam has obviously not achieved its major objectives of reducing the flow of supplies and men into South Vietnam and of forcing Hanoi to negotiate. To the contrary, the enemy has increased its flow of personnel and material south and Hanoi's determination is as firm as ever. Air attacks could contribute more with a greater weight of attack, but the most important change could come from drastically revised rules of engagement.

Aug 66

CIA Intel. Memorandum - "The Vietnamese Communists' Will to Persist"

- North Vietnam's own industry makes only the most marginal contribution to their military strength; practically their entire support comes from external sources. Despite US air attacks, their logistic and transportation system is working better than it did 18 months ago before the bombing began. North Vietnam is taking punishment

Notes from Intelligence Documents on Vietnam War (continued)

on its own territory, but can afford the price. In available maneuver battalions, the Allied to Communist ratio is close to one to one. If Hanoi can maintain this ratio, the regime almost certainly believes it can wear down US will. International opinion is favorable to North Vietnam, the USSR and China will support Hanoi, and North Vietnamese morale is good.

Nov 66

CIA Intel. Memorandum - "The Effectiveness of the Rolling Thunder Program in North Vietnam"

- Effectiveness of Rolling Thunder diminished in 1966-(January through September). US bombing diverted manpower and increased physical damage, but despite heavier US air attacks, North Vietnam increased its efforts in South Vietnam and their war capabilities improved. The North Vietnamese manpower drain peaked in 1965-66, and barring a great increase in casualties, requirements will go down in 1967. Bombing has not visibly reduced Hanoi's will, nor has the air campaign changed third country attitudes (generally negative) towards the war.

23 May 67

CIA Intel. Memorandum - "The Vietnam Situation: Air Evaluation and Estimate"

- The strategic balance has not been altered; Hanoi's will has not been shaken. Hanoi seems confident of a prolonged stalemate which eventually will force the US to scale down its objectives. Hanoi will continue to base its strategy on a war of attrition and will not negotiate from weakness. US air attacks have reinforced their determination. Although not committed to success

Notes from Intelligence Documents on Vietnam War (continued)

at any cost, China is not willing to yield at this point. China will intervene if US air attacks are made against Chinese bases, or if the US makes a major invasion of North Vietnam, or if the Hanoi government disintegrates. The Soviet Union probably believes that it has no alternative but to help Hanoi until a political solution becomes possible. A prolonged war hurts the world image and position of the US. North Vietnam has the manpower base to continue such a grinding war, keep pace with the US buildup (now 1/2 million men), and improve its logistic position. The future will depend on which side is more determined.

Sep 67

CIA Intel. Memorandum - "Rolling Thunder: The 1967 Campaign Against LOCs"

- Rolling Thunder changed significantly in scope and intensity in 1967. Industrial targets in North Vietnam were neutralized; new targets in heretofore restricted areas around Hanoi and Haiphong, and in the Chinese border area were hit for the first time; and there was renewed emphasis on LOC interdiction. However, North Vietnam's logistic capabilities were not reduced, and military and economic goods continue to move.

13 Nov 67

SNIE 14.3-67 - "Capabilities of the Vietnamese Communists for Fighting in South Vietnam"

- Manpower is becoming an increasingly difficult problem for Hanoi; the strength of enemy forces (VC/NVA) has declined over the last year. Recruiting in the south is becoming more difficult and VC units are increasingly dependent on NVA replacements. Regular force strength (VC/NVA) in the south, now estimated at 118,000, has declined slightly while guerrilla forces have suffered a substantial reduction.

Notes from Intelligence Documents on Vietnam War (continued)

- Considering all relevant factors, there is a "fairly good chance" that overall enemy strength in the south will continue to decline.
- Hanoi still retains adequate capabilities (manpower, material and supplies) to support its strategy of a protracted war of attrition.

(Note: CIA objected at the time to the manpower aspects of this estimate, but was not in a position to challenge it since the Agency did not possess its own capability to analyze Order of Battle (O/B) material. As a result, CIA created its own O/B analytical capability in late 1967, and thereafter, reached its own conclusions with respect to manpower and O/B estimates. Documents captured in May 1970 gave positive evidence that enemy main force strength (VC/NVA) in the south in late 1967 was more like 175,000 to 195,000 rather than the 118,000 given in the SNIE of November 1967. (See entry below for November 1970.)

Jan 68

CIA Intel. Memorandum - "The Manpower Situation in North Vietnam"

- North Vietnamese manpower reserves are adequate to meet current demands. Hanoi could support a considerably higher mobilization effort than present levels. (South Vietnam effectively controls only 11 to 12 million population, while North Vietnam exceeds 18 million. Yet South Vietnam has sustained a military force 1 1/2 times larger than North Vietnam's.

Notes from Intelligence Documents on Vietnam War (continued)

If North Vietnam mobilized the same share of population as has South Vietnam, North Vietnam could double its present force.)

Mar 68

CIA Intel. Memorandum - "An Assessment of Rolling Thunder Program Through December 1967"

- During a sustained and intensive interdiction campaign against almost every significant military and economic target in North Vietnam during 1967, there was no significant weakening of North Vietnam's military capabilities, resolution to carry on the war, or popular support of the regime. Air defense targets received the most damage, but USSR/China aid resulted in a more effective air defense system at the end of 1967. US aircraft losses went up - 366 in North Vietnam in 1967 (16 percent increase over 1966 losses). The ratio of US aircraft losses to sorties went up in 1967; in fact, the loss rate against tough industrialized targets was nine times higher in 1967 than in 1966.

Oct 68

CIA Intel. Memorandum - "An Assessment of the Rolling Thunder Program Through June 1968"
(Covers 1 January - 30 June 1968)

- The US bombing halt north of the 19th Parallel on 31 March 1968 resulted in Rolling Thunder becoming almost exclusively an interdiction campaign against logistic targets in the Panhandle and in freeing almost all of North Vietnam's population and industry, as well as many key transportation targets from attack. North Vietnam continued to move large quantities of men and supplies throughout North Vietnam

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Notes from Intelligence Documents on Vietnam War (continued)

and into South Vietnam, and North Vietnam LOCs were fully operational after the bombing halt. During the period, a record level of seaborne imports arrived in North Vietnam through Haiphong and air defenses were strengthened in the North. (107 US aircraft were lost over North Vietnam during the period bringing the total to 984. 1,300 US personnel have been shot down over North Vietnam since the beginning of the US air offensive.) The bombing halt noticeably raised the morale of the North Vietnamese people, supporting their leaders' contention that North Vietnam will ultimately win.

10 Oct 70

CIA Intel. Memorandum - "Hanoi's Short-Term Intentions"

- Hanoi's fundamental views have not changed; namely, that their struggle will be long and painful, but they have more staying power than their opponents (the United States and South Vietnam).

Nov 70

CIA Intel. Memorandum - "NVA/VC Forces in South Vietnam" (Estimates include both combat and administrative/logistic forces.)

- 31 Dec 1967 Estimate - 270,000 to 315,000
(This was the high just before Tet 1968.
Totals include 125,000 to 135,000 NVA; and
50,000 to 60,000 VC - Combat)
- 31 Dec 1968 Estimate - 250,000 to 290,000
(Includes 120,000-130,000 NVA; and 50,000-
60,000 VC - Combat)
- 31 Mar 1970 Estimate - 210,000 to 250,000
(Includes 95,000-105,000 NVA; and 35,000-
45,000 VC - Combat)

Notes from Intelligence Documents on Vietnam (continued)

(Note: As already indicated, CIA was not in the Order of Battle (O/B) business until late 1967 just before Tet 1968. After the enemy offensive of Tet 1968, O/B matters became the focus of much greater attention on the part of the Intelligence Community. By late 1968, CIA and DIA reached agreement on NVA units and strengths, but not on Viet Cong strength and attrition rates. MACV in May 1969 completed its first all-source O/B, an improvement over previous estimates, but generally too low in numbers of personnel in CIA's view. By mid-1970, CIA and DIA were able to agree generally on all (NVA and VC) main force, administrative and logistic units and strengths, but were never able to agree completely on guerrilla and political cadre strengths. The capture in May 1970 of numerous enemy documents in Cambodia (when COSVN HQ, the high command in South Vietnam, was overrun), was a major factor in solidifying agreement between CIA and DIA, and confirmed the correctness of the generally higher numbers held by CIA.)

Nov 70

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Notes from Intelligence Documents on Vietnam (continued)

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May 71

CIA Intel. Memorandum - "North Vietnam's
Capabilities to Continue to Wage War"

- Hanoi's military supplies and war-supporting goods come almost exclusively from the Soviet Union and China. The manpower and material burdens on North Vietnam over the past six years have been manageable and acceptable. Manpower and material resources available for continuing the war are clearly adequate to support any of the strategic options (from protracted warfare to all-out countrywide offensive) Hanoi might choose to follow in 1972.

Notes from Intelligence Documents on Vietnam (continued)

10 Apr 72

CIA Intel. Memorandum - "Net Assessment of
North Vietnamese and South Vietnamese Forces"

- NVA forces (including regular forces kept inside North Vietnam) grew from 250,000 in 1964 to 575,000 in April 1972. Losses over the same 1964-72 period were roughly 900,000. Hanoi inducts about 100,000 men each year without drawing down on its manpower pool, although their losses in any year of significant offensive action have been well over 100,000. Hanoi's will to prosecute the war remains essentially unimpaired.

Notes from Intelligence Documents on Vietnam War (continued)

Jun 72

CIA Intel. Memorandum - "The Effect of the Past Month's Events on North Vietnam's Military Capabilities"

- The current offensive ("Easter" offensive of 1972) has been costly to Hanoi and the drain of North Vietnam manpower has been the largest since 1968. Material loss rates have been even higher than those during the high levels of Tet 1968.
- Current US mining and bombing campaign is exacting a heavy toll from North Vietnamese imports and transportation has been disrupted, but this has not significantly affected Hanoi's offensive. Supplies were already in place in the forward areas before the US interdiction effort started.
- The future impact of US interdiction is uncertain and we are not able to judge the results. Much depends on help received from the USSR and China.

Jul 72

CIA Intel. Memorandum - "The Impact of Events Since May 1972 on North Vietnam's Capabilities to Continue the War"

- North Vietnamese casualties from their "Easter Offensive" were heavy; 40 percent of their Infantry Regiments may be temporarily ineffective. Armor and artillery units have also suffered severe losses. The enemy, however, is now dug in on good defensive positions in the northern part of South Vietnam and it might be very difficult for South Vietnamese forces to regain areas now under enemy control.
- The mining of the major North Vietnamese harbors has effectively cut off seaborne imports from the USSR and China, and means that Hanoi's imports must travel overland

Notes from Intelligence Documents on Vietnam War (continued)

through China by rail to the North Vietnamese border. Chinese transportation systems are adequate to handle the load. North Vietnam can probably handle the movement of tonnage south from the China border by truck. Later the motor gasoline portion of that tonnage (500 tons out of a total of 2700 tons per day) can be moved by the pipeline now being built.

Aug 72

CIA Intel. Memorandum - "The Overall Impact of the US Bombing and Mining Programs in North Vietnam"

- Enemy main force units, at least in northern South Vietnam, will not be materially affected by any lack of supplies. Available data indicates that approximately 3000 tons per day have been imported overland into North Vietnam during June and July 1972. This is less than one half of the total imported per day during 1971, but is greater than the 2700 daily tonnage needed for North Vietnamese military forces and minimum economic needs. It is likely that Hanoi can not only sustain this level, but also increase it over the 3000 tons per day level in the future.
- The combination of reduced imports and continued bombing is unlikely to cripple Hanoi's military capabilities, but their civilian economy is facing increasing problems. On balance, the US program will not of itself pose unmanageable difficulties for North Vietnam now or through 1973.

Notes from Intelligence Documents on Vietnam War (continued)

12 Oct 73

NIE 53/14.3-73 - "Short-Term Prospects for Vietnam"

- Hanoi must believe that it will have to return to the battlefield to gain its objective of unifying Vietnam. The current military balance is only slightly in favor of the government of South Vietnam (GVN); however, by mid-1974 it may shift to North Vietnam's (NVN's) advantage in view of the heavy infiltration of personnel and forward supply buildup now underway. The political balance in South Vietnam is clearly in the GVN's favor at present and will remain so.
- Hanoi could opt for a major military offensive during the dry season (Oct 1973-May 1974). Beyond this dry season, odds favor a major enemy offensive in 1975. SVN forces will be considerably weaker in Military Region I than NVN forces and might not be able to hold without renewed US air support. GVN ground forces, including mobile reserves, are now fully deployed throughout the Republic of Vietnam (SVN); GVN forces would probably yield substantial territory at least initially. GVN's prospects are mixed - much depends on the United States. Drastic reduction or suspension of US aid to SVN, or clear indication that the United States was no longer committed to SVN's survival will seriously affect the viability of the GVN.

2 Apr 74

IIM - "South Vietnam - A Net Military Assessment"

- NVA forces total about 660,000 men of which 285,000 are in SVN, Laos and Cambodia. Enemy forces in the South have grown despite the heavy losses of the 1972 "Easter Offensive" and have increased 55,000 since the cease-fire of January 1973. We expect a generally low level of activity at least through May 1974. This could

Notes from Intelligence Documents on Vietnam War (continued)

rapidly change if NVN commits its strategic reserves in the South and infiltrates enough men to bring units in SVN to strength and form a replacement pool. An enemy offensive would probably regain control of Quang-Tri City, perhaps capture Hue and make sizeable gains in Military Region 1. In Military Region 2, Kontum and Pleiku might fall and in Military Region 3, temporary gains might be made north and northwest of Saigon. We doubt whether the GVN could stop the offensive without large scale US logistic assistance. The situation could develop where the GVN would be unable to regain the initiative without the reintroduction of US combat air and naval support.

23 Dec 74

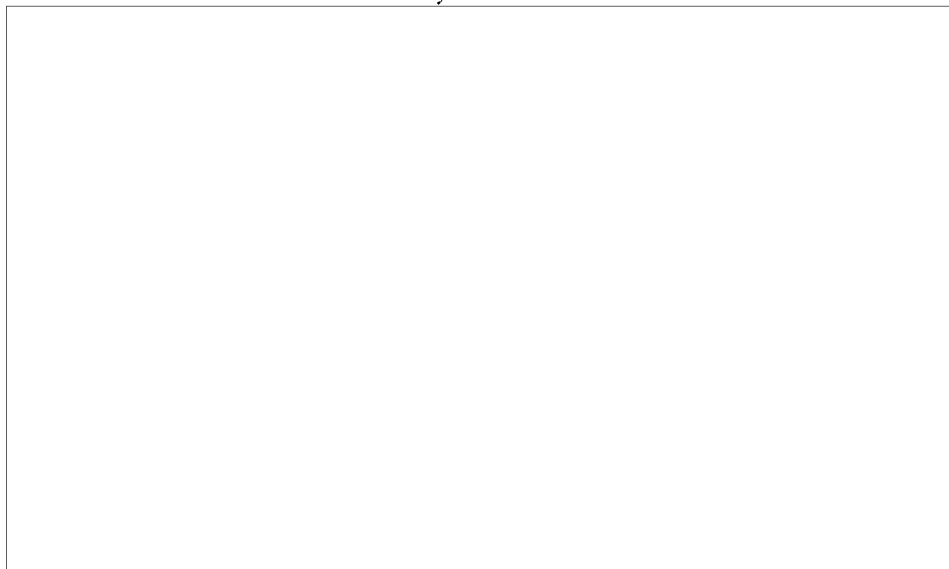
NIE 53/14.3-2-74 - "Short-Term Prospects for Vietnam"

- Communist forces in South Vietnam are more powerful than ever.
- GVN forces, with the decline of US military aid, are significantly weaker in their logistic position.
- Hanoi has many options for increasing military action between now and mid-1975.
- Hanoi will probably raise the tempo of fighting and commit part of its strategic reserve in the south. This risks major defeats for GVN forces and compounds the GVN's manpower and logistic problems. Hanoi has a significant advantage over the next six months.

Notes from Intelligence Documents on Vietnam War (continued)

- Without an increase in US aid, the GVN's military situation is parlous.
- It is even possible that Hanoi, given the opportunity, might make an all-out offensive, committing all its strategic reserves, but our best judgment says Hanoi will not do so at this time, preferring a lower level of political-military action.

SNIE 53/14.3-75, 27 March 1975



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